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SUB-GROUP:

**Potter's Field
(Hart Island, Bx.)**

SERIES:

Record of Burials

YEARS:

1917-1961, with gaps

VOLUME #:

SERIES:
Pamphlet

**A Historical Resume of
Potter's Field**

YEARS:
1869-1967

**a
historical
resumé
of
potter's field**



1869-1967

There has been much written about The Potter's Field on Hart Island and the involvement of the Department of Correction of the City of New York in this important community activity.

The department's involvement results directly from the *Administrative Code of the City of New York*, wherein it specifically states that in accordance with...

**" CHAPTER 24
DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE
TITLE A**

Section 603-10.0 *Potter's Field*. - The Commissioner shall have charge of the Potter's Field, and when the necessity therefor shall arise, shall have power to lay out additional Potter's Fields or other public burial places for the poor and strangers and from time to time enclose and extend the same to make enclosures therein and to build vaults therein, and to provide all necessary labor and for interments therein. *The Potter's Field on Hart's Island, however, shall remain under the control of the Department of Correction, and the burial of deceased paupers therein shall continue under rules and regulations established by the joint action of the Department of Welfare and Correction, or in case of disagreement between such departments, under such regulations as may be established by the Mayor.* (As amended by L.L. 1942, No. 50, October 29; as amended by L.L. 1953, No. 136, August 5.)"

While many other projected plans are being officially studied for the burial of indigents, this Department in the interim must maintain the present Potter's Field at Hart Island as mandated. While we perform this necessary service for the community, paradoxically, it provides a vocational activity for those inmates voluntarily participating. On release they are enabled to obtain employment in this area.

George F. McGrath
Commissioner
Department of Correction

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION



CITY OF NEW YORK

Potter's Field

Hart Island

HON. JOHN V. LINDSAY
Mayor

HON. GEORGE F. McGRATH
Commissioner

POTTER'S FIELD

Historical Background

"Then Judas, which had betrayed Him, saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests . . . and they took counsel, and brought with them the potters' field to bury strangers in." This excerpt from the Gospel of St. Matthew is probably the origin of the name **Potter's Field**; certainly, even in pre-Biblical times, man felt the obligation to do justice and honor to the dead with proper burial.

The City of New York has undertaken the responsibility of laying to rest the bodies of those in the City who died indigent or unbefriended, since the early part of the 19th century, when they were interred at Washington Square in Greenwich Village. In 1823, these remains were removed to Fifth Avenue and 40-42 Streets, Manhattan. When this site was selected for a reservoir, the remains were again removed to Fourth Avenue and 50th Street, this ground being later granted to the Women's Hospital. In 1857, the remains of 100,000 paupers and strangers were transferred to Ward's Island, 75 acres of which were allocated for this purpose.

The laws of 1868 authorized the Commissioners of the New York City Departments of Public Charities and Correction to purchase and take title to any plot of ground, convenient and accessible to the City and large enough for a public cemetery, under custody and management of the Department of Charities. In the same year, the City of New York acquired Hart Island from John Hunter and son for \$75,000. During the yellow fever epidemic of 1870, the southern part housed diseased persons confined to isolation.

Forty-five acres on the northern tip of the hundred-one acre Island were designated as a burial site, or **Potter's Field**, on April 20, 1869. Louisa Van Slyke, an orphan who died alone in

Charity Hospital at the age of 24, became the first to be buried there.

In 1895, the Department of Correction acquired the Hart Island institution and established a Branch Workhouse for aged and infirm men, narcotics addicts, and short-term inmates. In 1905, the Department also established a reformatory at Hart Island for young offenders known as a "Reformatory for Misdemeanants." This was transferred to another location off the Island in order to rectify the lack of segregation between adolescent and adult inmate programs.

In 1941, the bodies of the Civil War veterans who had been buried in the Civil War Cemetery on Hart Island were disinterred and removed to Cypress Hills National Cemetery. After World War II, the U.S. Army was allotted 10 acres of the City Cemetery to build a Nike base. This was abandoned by the Army on June 30, 1961, and returned to the City.

In 1950, the Board of Estimate adopted a resolution authorizing the release of Hart Island to the Department of Welfare to be used for the rehabilitation of homeless men, on the assumption that Rikers Island facilities would sufficiently accommodate the steadily increasing inmate population. During the early part of 1954, when increased inmate population made the capacity of housing on Rikers Island inadequate, custody of Hart Island was returned to the Department of Correction.

Departments Involved — Laws

Since 1941, New York State Social Welfare Law No. 141 (now called Social Services Law No. 141, as per 1967 amendment) has made it compulsory for the City to provide for the burial of the dead, or to reimburse friends or relatives of the deceased for the costs of the burial, in whole or in part, if legally responsible relatives of the deceased were not able to do so.



Monument erected by the New York City Army Reserve, on May 10, 1877, in memory of the Veteran Union Soldiers and Sailors buried at the Civil War Cemetery on Hart Island. The monument still stands on Hart Island, although the remains of these dead were removed to Cypress Hills National Cemetery in 1941.

Present laws of the City of New York authorize joint jurisdiction over Potter's Field by the Department of Correction and the Department of Welfare. Section 603-10.0 of the Administrative Code states that "the Commissioner of the Department of Welfare shall have charge of the Potter's Field and power to lay out additional Potter's Fields when the necessity shall arise, and from time to time to enclose and extend the same, to make enclosures therein and to build vaults therein, and to provide all necessary labor and for interments therein. The Potter's Field on Hart Island, however, shall remain under the control of the Department of Correction, and the burial of deceased paupers therein shall continue under rules and regulations established by the joint action of the Departments of Welfare and Correction, or in case of disagreement, under such regulations as may be established by the Mayor."

Records and Burial Procedure

Any citizen who becomes aware of the death of any person is required by law to report the death to the local Police precinct, who notifies the Chief Medical Examiner. If a person dies in a City hospital or institution, and his body is not claimed within 24 hours from the time mailing notice of his death is received, the Department of Hospitals is authorized to allow his burial at Potter's Field.

The body of a deceased pauper is sent to the county morgue of the county in which he dies, and the medical examiner applies to the Board of Health for a burial permit. If the body is unclaimed, the burial permit and the deceased are sent to the central morgue at Bellevue Hospital on East 29 Street, Manhattan.

There, services are said for the deceased by a Catholic or Protestant clergyman. Rabbis do not say services, because indigent members of the Jewish faith are not taken to Potter's Field.

The Hebrew Free Burial Society provides for their interment. In 1960, two Catholic societies began to do the same thing. The Chinese also usually provide for the private burial of their own people. Actually, no one knows the religion of many of the strangers buried in Potter's Field, but the authorities do their best to notify the proper agencies when a member of one of these groups comes to their attention.

At the morgue, the bodies of the deceased are wrapped in shroud paper and sealed in pine coffins which are lined with waterproof paper when necessary. Unknowns are fingerprinted and photographed, and are interred with all their clothes and belongings, so that they can be identified later. Inside the coffins and on top of them are placed the duplicate and triplicate, respectively, of the burial certificate, chemically treated so that they are legible even after 25 years.

The bodies of the deceased are then taken to the City Cemetery at Hart Island via a Department of Hospitals morgue wagon, which operates twice weekly. It is transported from the Bronx to the Island by a ferry run by the New York City Department of Marine and Aviation.

The morgue wagon driver is stopped at the entrance to the Island and checked in by the dock security officer. During the rest of his drive, along the bumpy country road to the cemetery, he passes fields of high grass and blue asters in the summer. No one else stops him until he reaches the burial site; there are no living persons at Potter's Field except for the inmate burial detail and the correction officers. At the burial site, the driver presents the burial certificates to the officer in charge. A team of inmates, dressed in gray, remove the coffins and inscribe them with the names of the deceased in indelible crayon.

The coffins are placed in trenches 15x40 ft. dug 7 to 8 ft. deep. The adults coffins are piled in stacks of three deep;



Ferry carrying Department of Hospitals morgue wagon approaches Hart Island after its 1/3 of a mile trip from Fordham Street, City Island, the Bronx.



Captain-in-Command Theodore A. Flynn glances through an old interment register. Records have been retained since 1869, when the wife of Fred Bartels, the first cemetery warden instituted the bookkeeping system. Present records are maintained by a clerk paid by the City of New York.





Coffins of infants and limbs are unloaded by inmates at burial site. These are lined up in alphabetical order and interred at foot end of the trench.



Morgue wagon is then moved to other end of the trench, where inmates remove the rough pine coffins of deceased adult to be interred.



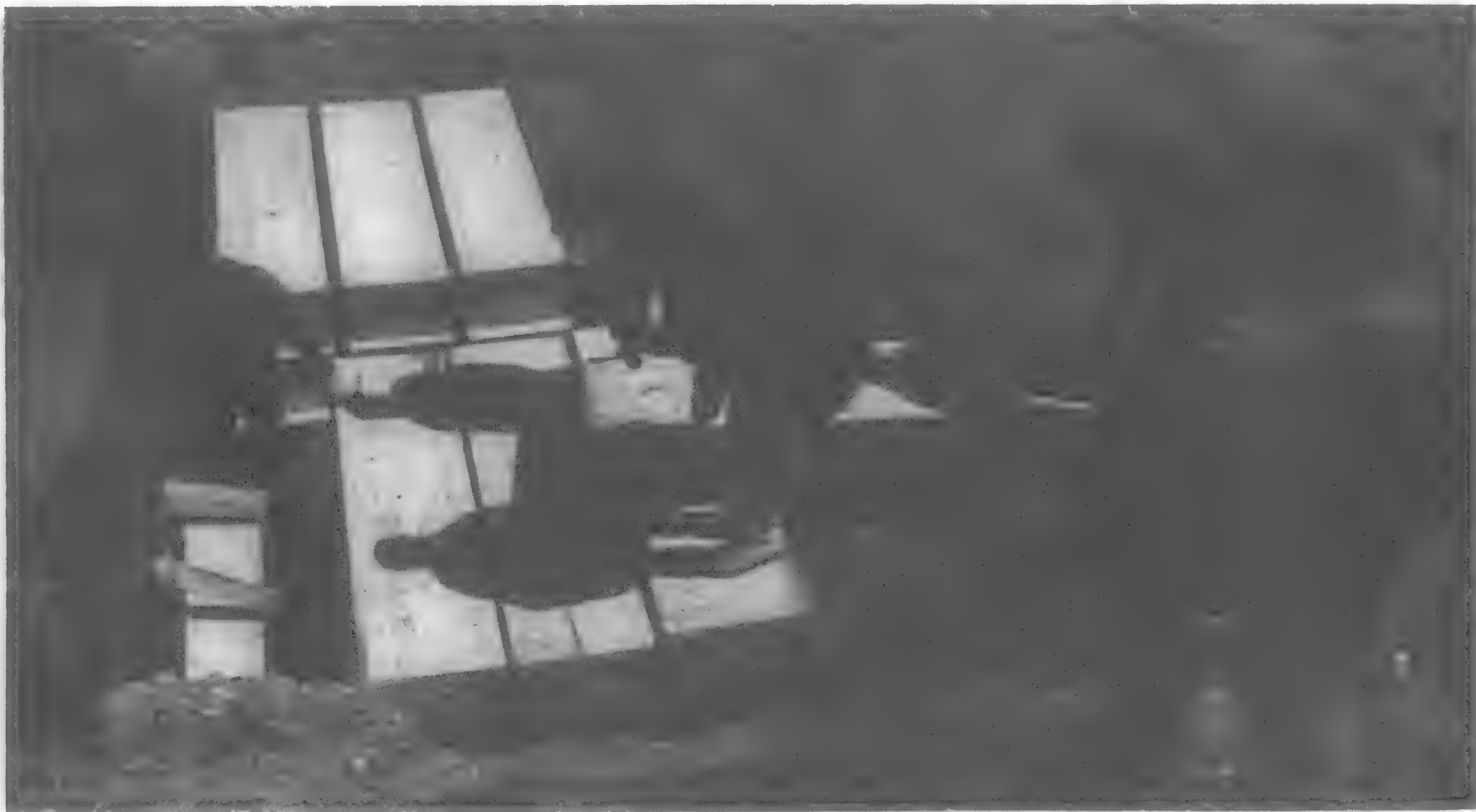
Inmates line up coffins to be put in trenches, check that they are properly sealed, and inscribe identifying information, under the direction of the correction officer.



Coffins are carried into trenches. Inmates on level ground pass the coffin to inmates in the trench.



Trenches are seven to eight feet deep and a hundred and fifty feet long. Inmates climb into the trenches on wooden ladders, and are watched over by correction officers. The Long Island Sound keeps a lonely, constant watch over the entire Island.



Inmates lower coffin into place using two wooden planks and round pointed picks. Coffins are carefully lined up in two rows along the length of the trench, in columns three coffins high.

the babies, children and limbs are placed in rows according to alphabetical order. Although the entire burial ground is consecrated, Catholics were buried in a separate section prior to 1960, when they ceased to be buried in the City Cemetery. There are no individual tombstones, but plot and section markers indicate the location of the coffin, by a numerical system.

Necessary data pertaining to the deceased has been recorded in the interment registers since the first burial at Potter's Field. The individual record books now in use contain 400 pages and last for about six months each. They are divided into three categories: Adults, Infants, and Limbs. The entry for each body includes permit number, section number, plot number, grave number, age of the deceased, date the permit was issued, date of death, cause of death, signature of the medical examiner, place of death, and date of burial. Careful records are also kept of disinterments, of which there are about 150 a year.

There are about 600,000 dead buried at Potter's Field, approximately two thirds of them infants and stillborn. Of the 8,000 burials a year, 1,500 are infants. Because interments are made on the mass level of approximately 125 a week, there can be no rites said over the dead at the grave sites. Despite the large number of burials, the 45-acre area of the cemetery is in no danger of being exhausted. Custodial forces are authorized to reuse burial ground after 25 years, sufficient time for the complete decay of the original remains. Currently, they are using ground which has not been used for forty years.

Costs

The cost incurred by the Department of Correction for the maintenance of the City Cemetery on Hart Island for the year 1966, when forty inmates were assigned to cemetery detail, were as follows:

Custodial salaries for two correction officers assigned to cemetery detail ...	\$18,020.00
Food for inmates (five days per week)	7,787.52
Clothing for inmates	4,000.00
Miscellaneous supplies such as chlorinated lime, cement for ground markers, tools, as well as depreciation for gasoline pump used for draining graves	285.55
TOTAL	\$30,093.07

The cost to the City for the burial of an adult is \$75.00, and of an infant or fetus, \$29.00. Only half of this amount is reimbursed by New York State, except in the cases of State charges and Social Security collectors, for whose burial the City is reimbursed by the State and Federal governments respectively.

Inmates and Custodial Staff

In 1966, the inmate census decreased sharply as a result of changes in the penal code, and Hart Island was no longer required for housing of short-term prisoners. Hart Island has been utilized by the Office of the Narcotics Administrator during 1967 as a rehabilitation center for narcotics addicts.

Thirty inmates from the N.Y.C. Reception and Classification Center for Men, who come to Hart Island to work during the day, are charged with burial



The inmates begin to cover the coffins with soil. When the job is completed, ground covering the trench will be level with the background.

and upkeep of the entire cemetery at present. *Assignments to Hart Island are made on a voluntary basis.* Many of the inmates consider work there desirable, because it affords them the opportunity to be in the open air and away from the prison proper, and because it gives them job experience in a well-paying field. They are carefully interviewed to ascertain that they can perform these services without becoming emotionally upset.

The inmates remove the coffins from the morgue wagon and inter them, make road repairs, spray the ground to control vermin infestation, and take charge of the general upkeep. Six of the inmates disinter the remains on occasions when it becomes necessary to do so.

On one such occasion, a man had been buried for 33 years, when his son suddenly hit oil millions and wanted to give his father a private burial. Another time, an unknown buried there was later found to be an American veteran of World War I. Until shortly before his death, he had sent small donations to a group of French nuns who had nursed him back to health during the war. When his letters and contributions stopped coming, the nuns investigated to find out what had happened to him. They learned that he had died penniless and been buried here.

They paid to have his remains brought to France and buried in their convent.

The inmates are under the custodial charge of two correction officers assigned permanently to Hart Island, and Captain Theodore A. Flynn, who is in command of the Hart Island security, maintenance, and burial detail. Captain Flynn has been with the Department of Correction for almost 30 years.

Inmates Pay Tribute to Unbefriended and Indigent Dead

Because of the massive number of interments made at Potter's Field weekly and the great expense to the City, burials must be un-elaborate. Primarily, those interred on Hart Island are not vagrants and alcoholics from Skid Row, as hearsay has it, but people who worked hard during their lifetimes just to "keep their heads above water," and could not afford the expenses of private funerals.

The inmates on Hart Island, many of whom are without friends and families, appealed to the Warden and offered to build a monument to the unbefriended dead. This was accomplished in 1948 when, in cooperation with the custodial staff, they erected a 30-foot high monument in the center of the burial site. On one side is engraved a simple cross, on the other the word "Peace."

"There is a good chance that relief clients in New York City who die penniless will no longer be buried in Potter's Field. Welfare Commissioner Mitchell I. Ginsberg told the News he is 'tending toward' allowing \$250 for the funeral and burial of a person on welfare rolls who dies destitute. Experts say this amount will provide services and a grave in cemeteries outside the city limits. . . ."

— Daily News, New York, N.Y.
Monday, August, 1966



Concrete section markers indicate the locations of coffins within the trenches. There can be no individual head stones, because coffins are piled one on top of another. Mass burial on the Island has given rise to the ironic remark, "In death, they are not alone."



The above monument was erected by inmate volunteers of the department in memory of the communities indigent who are buried in Potters Field.

Copy prepared by Gail Silver
Public Relations Unit
Department of Correction
City of New York

Photos by: Arthur Aidala, Public Relations Unit
C.O. Cecil Ramsey, R.C.C.F.M.
Robert E. Hood & Bryan R. Tolbert, Freelance Photographers

August, 1967

*Printed at the Rikers Island Print Shop
Inmate Vocational Training Program*

VOLUME #:

SERIES:
Newsclipping

**New Yorker Article -
"To The Potter's Field"**

YEARS:
July 19, 1993

A month later, I woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and said to myself, 'Rick! You damn fool! You'd better get out there and see those tomatoes!' So I spent the day in that tomato field, and by the time I came back I was hooked on tomatoes, absolutely hooked."

I was interested in knowing what Rick thought of Calgene's tomato. He laughed, and said, "I'll wait till I taste it."

I asked, "Well, do you think it's possible to produce a back-yard supermarket tomato?"

Rick thought for a while, then said, "Well, it is important to keep in mind that, while we have become quite skilled at recombinant DNA, we still don't really know how genes work, and the more we find out about genes the less simple their behavior appears to be." He laughed again and scratched his head through his old hat. "I mean, even something like the tomato, which has only a thousand or so genes, and a genome that has been extensively mapped—well, tomatoes are damn tricky things. There are so many things that can go wrong when you breed a tomato—yield, maturation time, quality, uniformity, coloration, size. One little cat face or growth crack and people won't buy the damn thing. Now, color is relatively easy. It's not hard to breed a tomato that looks great and tastes like hell." He laughed. "I'm not entirely convinced that recombinant DNA will do any more for supermarket tomatoes than classical breeding has done. A few years back, the Israelis made a lot of noise saying that they had suppressed the same gene Calgene had, using conventional methods—only, they called theirs the RIN gene. Said they suppressed it with a gene they got out of a wild cherry."

I spotted what appeared to be some ancient rolls of toilet paper high on a row of cluttered shelves. "What's that?" I asked, pointing.

"South American t.p. The aboriginal stuff," Rick said. He told me to reach up and get a roll. It was yellow with age and looked as if it would do fine for finishing carpentry work. "Recombinant DNA can't hold a candle to this invention," Dr. Rick said. "Feel the consistency of that stuff?" He rubbed a sheet between his fingers. "Much better than American toilet paper for wrapping tomato specimens in." ♦

LENIN'S TOMB

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Washington Post Book World

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

TO THE POTTER'S FIELD

Who are New York's unclaimed dead? Of the seventy-four thousand deaths that occur in the city each year, some of the most haunting involve the more than three thousand unknown or indigent people who are laid to rest in the communal graves of Potter's Field.

BY EDWARD CONLON

This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Rise up, be off to the potter's house; there I will give you my message. I went down to the potter's house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased. Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done? Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.

—Jeremiah 18:1-6.

DEATH comes to one in a hundred New Yorkers each year. The rate is a little higher here than the national average, which is nine in a thousand. In 1990, natural causes—a designation that includes all forms of illness, from cancer to exposure—accounted for ninety-three per cent of the deaths in New York, or 69,049; homicides for 2,272; accidents for 1,908; suicides for 646. Nationally, the order of the last three categories is different: accidents, suicides, then homicides. Whether you rejoice that fewer New Yorkers die by accident than by intention is one of the finer tests for optimism yet devised. The suicide rate, however, is plainly welcome news, and something of a puzzle. At nine in a hundred thousand, it is significantly below the national average.

Most New Yorkers are spoken for when they die: there is someone to hire an undertaker, to call friends, family, and clergy together to remember the life and observe the body's passage to mausoleum, grave, or urn. But many who die here are strangers to the city: the homeless, luckless, transient, and alone—people without friendships or connections, who cannot inspire memories after death, because they escaped notice when they were alive. Each year, approximately three thousand New Yorkers die unidentified, or without leaving infor-

mation on next of kin. Their relatives may live in another country, or they may be unable, financially or emotionally, to lay claim to the body. In Manhattan, these dead are zippered into rubberized canvas bags and delivered by truck, with appropriate paperwork, to a morgue near Bellevue Hospital, on First Avenue and Thirtieth Street. In the lobby of that building, there is an inscription, in steel block capitals on rich brown marble, that reads, "TACEANT COLLOQUIA. EFFUGIAT RISUS. HIC LOCUS EST UBI MORS GAUDET SUCCURRERE VITAE." It means "Let conversation cease. Laughter, take flight. This place is where death delights to aid the living."

The Chief Medical Examiner, whose office is above the morgue at Bellevue, has jurisdiction over all unusual, suspicious, or unexpected deaths and over all unidentified bodies, whether or not the cause of death is known. There are five county morgues, and a deputy medical examiner is assigned to each of them: Bellevue; Kings County; Queens General; Jacobi Hospital, in the Bronx; and Seaview Hospital, on Staten Island—but a fire six years ago in the Staten Island morgue has caused that borough's dead to be taken, for now, to Brooklyn. When there is an overflow in any of the morgues, the bodies are kept in refrigerated trucks. Just under half of the seventy-four thousand deaths in the city are referred to one or another of the medical examiners' offices annually, and almost sixteen thousand bodies are examined. Autopsies are performed on about half of those.

When an unidentified body is discovered, the police or paramedics ordinarily call the medical examiner. If the body is not decomposed and the cause of death is natural, the body goes to the morgue. If it is decomposed, or if there are signs of trauma, an investigator from the

medical examiner's office is sent for, and the body is examined. The police then attempt to notify the next of kin. If there are none or if they do not claim the body, the morgue will hold the body for two weeks before shipping it to New York's Potter's Field for "city burial," as the procedure is officially, if only occasionally, known. At its discretion, the M.E.'s office can hold a body indefinitely: Baby Hope, a five- or six-year-old girl who had been sexually abused, asphyxiated, and left in a cooler beside the George Washington Bridge in July of 1991, is still being held as investigation of the case continues.

Over three thousand bodies are buried each year in Potter's Field, which is on Hart Island, in the Bronx. Few cities take as much time and trouble to identify their dead as New York does, and most cities prefer cremation to traditional burial. After the riots in Washington Heights in July, 1992, the city arranged to fly the body of José García, a drug dealer killed by the police, to Santo Domingo for burial, and defended the expenditure by pointing out that the city pays for more than six thousand burials a year. This figure apparently represents the interments in Potter's Field and also burial grants awarded to poor families by the city's Human Resources Administration. There were 4,891 of these in 1992, at an average of eight hundred and fifty dollars each. The Crime Victims Board, a state agency, also pays for around a thousand funerals per year, three-quarters of which are for city residents.

The lobby of the Chief Medical Examiner's office is decorated with black-and-white photographic prints of Manhattan: the Woolworth Building, Grand Central Station, the Public Library, City Hall. There are couches and low tables, with ashtrays and boxes of

tissues, and when I was there recently someone had left behind some devotional literature from the St. Jude Society. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes.

Ellen Borakove is the director of public affairs for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York. She is practiced in talking about disaster, and has an air of kindness, competence, and invulnerability to surprise. Not long ago, Ms. Borakove showed me the interview room, which adjoins the lobby. Here families of the deceased are asked to identify the body and to provide information about illnesses and other medical history, in order to expedite the body's release from city custody.

"We used to do the I.D.s downstairs, in the morgue, and it was terrible," Ms. Borakove said. "We don't have makeup and things. Recently we got clearance to use Polaroid photos, and now we shoot the head, or enough to show it without any gross disfigurement. The M.E. has to determine the cause and the manner of death of a body, but the body is the property of the family. It's up to them what happens. In some religions, Jewish and Muslim, someone has to stay with the body, and small rooms are available to accommodate those people."

One such room is adjacent to the interview room—a narrow alcove like a miniature theatre, with a couch facing a coffin-shaped interior window. Behind the window are the steel doors of an elevator, which brings bodies up from the morgue below. The body is viewed like a museum exhibit, behind glass, and a kind of wake can be held. Families take advantage of this arrangement mostly if there is to be a foreign burial.

"Sometimes there are certain religious prohibitions against an autopsy," Ms. Borakove said. "The family then has forty-eight hours to get a judge to sign an order forbidding it, but to my knowledge that's never been done. We take great care to preserve the integrity of bodily fluids—put plastic sheets inside the autopsy table, so nothing drains

away. We always use the least invasive manner in determining cause of death. And only the family is entitled to the autopsy report and medical records.

"Say a body's found in a plastic bag in a lot. Fingerprints are taken and sent to the Missing Persons Squad, and then there are body and dental X-rays, and dental charts are drawn up. The investigators have a very good rate of identification—they miss maybe two in ten. The M.E.'s office employs many dentists, two anthropologists, and a radiologist—all on a consulting basis. A broken arm or rib might turn up on a medical history. We might have an anthropologist take a look—see what he or she has to say. We could have facial reconstructions done by police artists. Nothing is one-hundred-per-cent sure. We're talk-

drawers. A red digital readout flickers as the temperature rises and falls: thirty-five degrees, thirty-six, thirty-five. The walls are tiled in swimming-pool blue, and dim grids of fluorescent lights hang from the ceiling. Inside the drawers, the bodies lie on well-worn and dented stainless-steel trays, which slide out and can be lifted onto gurneys for transport and weighing. Opposite the refrigerator are rooms for X-rays and anthropological study, and vaults painted with a pyramidal poinsettia-red logo that warns "BIOHAZARD." Some bodies are kept in the vaults, which bring the maximum storage space to a hundred and seventy-five.

"A fair number of the spaces are filled," Ms. Borakove says. "Maybe we're at sixty- to seventy-per-cent capacity."

Half a dozen plain pine coffins, ranging from doll-size to giant-size, are stacked haphazardly on the floor. One is seven feet long, almost two feet wide, and more than two feet deep. "That's a pretty big one," she says, with a shrug.

The autopsy room, which is next door, is as ample as the morgue—perhaps thirty feet by sixty—and suggests an industrial kitchen as much as it does an operating room. Mason jars and plastic-ware

containers line the shelves and fill the counters. On the tables, great steel pots, scissors, ladles, and serrated knives are as plentiful as scalpels, forceps, and syringes. There are handsaws and striker saws (a striker saw is an electric drill with a toothed steel disk attached to the chuck), for cutting through bone; there are sinks, refrigerators, and X-ray boxes; packets of slides for histological analysis; containers for tissue samples. A paper bucket of the kind that fast-food chicken is served in contains plastic jars for snippets of organs and samples of fluids. Labels and tags have space for a name, date, case number, and three columns of small boxes to be checked, designating such items as "Brain," "Liver," "Kidney," "Urine," "Blood," "Bile," and "Other"; and "Homicide," "Motor Vehicle," and "Contagious." Because of the possibility of contagion, the pathologist works in



ing about a reasonable degree of certainty, which is a lot of work.

"Results may not come back for almost a year if the fingerprints circulate into the federal system. Any time there's a construction site they're digging up—especially downtown—you can expect something to turn up. Just recently, we got a little baby in Brooklyn that was fairly well skeletonized. And there are bones and body parts that have ceremonial and religious uses—in *santería*, especially—and anthropologists look at anything the cops think might be human remains. We get a fair number of things that aren't. The cops just brought in a box of bones from the Bronx that turned out to be pig bones."

We take the elevator down to the basement to visit the morgue. A concrete hall leads to a central refrigerator containing a hundred and twenty-six



Leo Allum

"If you must know, Jimmy, you came from a box in front of the market. It said 'Free Kittens.'"

two pairs of latex gloves under a pair made of steel mesh.

The center of the room holds eight autopsy tables: Each table is essentially a shallow, rectangular stainless-steel sink, almost four feet wide and more than eight feet long. Removable sections of steel mesh support the body, and the head and shoulders rest on a perforated steel sheet. The head is propped up by a grooved wooden block, dark with use, and smooth from many scrubblings. The sink, which drains at the foot end, is equipped with hot- and cold-water taps, hoses, and a scale suspended overhead for weighing various organs. Another hose feeds through a helmet-like guard, to prevent splashing, and is used for washing organs that have been laid on the mesh.

Are eight tables enough? Is there ever a rush?

"Sure there's a rush! They want a wake, they want a funeral, sometimes they order an autopsy done the next day. We do it within twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and try to keep it closer to twenty-four. We're here to serve the families of the people who died."

The morgue is currently undergoing renovation, its first since 1959. The renovation will include the installation of a DNA laboratory on a site once occupied by the Morgue Museum, which from 1960 to 1990 was open to police and firefighter cadets and to medical students. Among the highlights of the museum's collection were a meat grinder used to dispose of maternal casualties at an illegal-abortion mill; varieties of nonviable Siamese twins, in formaldehyde; and a ten-pound human liver. There were also knives, scissors, pens, a bow and arrow, ropes, pipes, baseball bats, fans, and extension cords—all collected at the scenes of homicides. A mannequin wore shreds of clothing from the body of a person who had been struck by lightning in Central Park. A homemade gallows and a self-surgery kit, consisting of a shaving mirror, a lamp, and a knife, were relics of bygone suicides. Other remains from self-inflicted deaths included a charred hand clasping a gun, and the tibia, protruding through the sole of a shoe, of a man who jumped from a forty-third-story window. In 1990, the exhibits—there were twenty-one hundred of

them—were sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington.

"It's hard to say what's strange and what isn't around here," Ms. Borakove says. "It's a matter of perspective. What gets to me most is the children who die from abuse. Everyone here will tell you the same. The autopsy tables, a baby—a little child on that big table. It makes an indelible image."

Thus said the Lord: Go, buy a potter's earthen flask. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests, and go out to the Valley of Benhinnom, at the entrance of the Potsherd Gate; there proclaim the words which I will speak to you: Listen to the word of the Lord, kings of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such evil upon this place that all who hear of it will feel their ears tingle.

—Jeremiah 19:1-3.

"If there's no fingerprints and no face, that's where I come in," Peggy Caldwell told me. She has been a consulting forensic anthropologist at the Chief Medical Examiner's office for ten years. She also is an adjunct professor of anthropology at William Paterson College, teaches first-, second-, third-, and seventh-grade science at St. Bernard's School in Manhattan, and is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers. "All the cases are interesting—every one of them is," she said. "It sounds trite but it's not just 'Oh dear, another foot.' I look at each one of them as a puzzle that needs solving—deserves it."

She is youthful, buoyant, with short blond hair, and she was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. She told me that later that day she was to consult for the television show "Law & Order," to explain how police artists do facial reconstructions.

"There are steps you take, no matter whether you're dealing with an isolated body part or bone or with a complete skeleton," she says. "First, archeology, or scene search—where the material comes from. You get that information from two sources: the police and the medical investigator, the 'tour doctor' on call. They describe the scene, the temperature, whether there's any ground cover, how deep the body's buried. They take photographs, and so on. You have to maintain the chain of evidence, protect the integrity of the findings, because everything has the potential of winding up in court. Most of my cases come from abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and

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the water. A lot are waterborne—you have to remember that New York is a city of fourteen islands. Others come from subway tunnels, railroad tracks, and dumpsters.

"The next thing to find out is, 'Is it human?' Roughly twenty-five per cent of the remains I'd see used to be nonhuman—fifty to sixty cases a year—but the percentage is lower now, because medical investigators are trained to eliminate those cases. Most of the nonhuman stuff is food—chicken, beef, turkey, pork—but occasionally something interesting turns up, like a bear paw found in Queens. That was tricky, because there's a strong architectural resemblance between bear paws and human hands—there's a mammalian evolutionary link. Things like this are described and then discarded, put in the incinerator. Sorry about that, but it's so they don't come back.

"Then there's preservation, conservation, and maceration. Preservation has to do with the state of the remains at first sight. If there's soft tissue, is it mummified or sun-bleached or broken, or goodness knows what? Conservation is what I do. If I glue or wash something or make any other alterations, it has to be accounted for, by law. Maceration is the removal of soft tissue. We usually don't macerate a whole person. It's too much time and work. Then harvesting. It sounds rather crass, but I take out the pieces I want or need. 'Need'—I mean, I don't *want* any of it! But I harvest pieces to answer questions about age, sex, and stature. Usually some long bone, or the medial clavicle for age, the pubic symphysis for age and sex, the sternal end of the fourth rib—a nice esoteric site, which is a good age indicator—or the iliac crest. Sometimes there's a little dissection with the striker saws, which look real mean, especially if there's blood all over 'em. Usually, I have the mortuary assistant handle that. We soak the bone in water for a month, then boil it in water at a very high temperature for five minutes. The soft tissue just pops right off, and we get nice clean bones to work with.

"Another step is to establish the time since death, or T.S.D. This is very important for the police. The missing-persons list for New York City would fill this room, and it's computerized. If I can narrow the time down—if I get lucky with some soft tissue or clothing—then I can usually establish the T.S.D.

within a matter of years. From five to ten, five to seven, more than fifty. The longer you're dead, the vaguer the estimate. They've tried to establish a data base for the whole Northeast, but it hasn't really worked out. You have hot summers and cold winters from Maine to New York, but New York City is ten degrees warmer than its surroundings, and anyway the immediate environment can do weirder things than the climate. I'm talking about elevator shafts and refrigerators. There are no hard-and-fast rules, but if I can get the T.S.D. within two years the cops have a shot."

The determination of sex, age, race, and stature is the first and most elementary objective of forensic anthropology, Ms. Caldwell explained. The morphology, or shape, of the bones is studied, and exhaustive measurements—more than four hundred for a complete skeleton—are taken, and analyzed by a statistical technique called discriminate function. Stature, the least difficult to assess, is estimated by calculation from the length of the long bones, usually of the leg, using a formula that was discovered during an examination of Korean War casualties. Estimating stature is easier than determining sex, particularly in the case of prepubescents.

"Then pathology and anomalies," she said. "Any indication of disease—a bro-

ken bone, TB, a filling in a tooth, any biological or man-made alteration—ante-mortem, post-mortem, or perimortem, which means around the time of death. It's important to remember that rats outnumber us in this city. We see a good deal of 'post-mortem carnivore chewing.' Anomalies are little genetic features that everybody possesses. Some correspond with race. There are over four hundred in any given skeleton, over a hundred and fifty in the mouth alone.

"Another question is 'occupation/behavior-related stress on bone.' For example, dancers hyperextend and hyperflex their feet. They're also subject to necrotic cysts on the hip. Have you ever seen the dancer Juliet Prowse? She can extend her leg right up to her head. Now, I've never seen her bones, and I hope I never do, but I bet she has a necrotic cyst like you wouldn't believe. There are patterns of pathologies, known indicators. A writer—your hand and right-arm bones would be longer, and there would be pronounced muscle markings. A boxer I saw was amazing. He had broken and healed cheeks, multiple broken ribs, a fractured sternum, a fracture at the end of his wrist, and there were changes in the hip as well. I remember the skeleton of a cowboy that used to be at the Smithsonian with stresses in his arms and legs. His feet are



ARTIST'S NOTEBOOK BY EDWARD KOREN

THE MOST UNKINDEST CUT



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"Last is personal identification. We reiterate the biological profile—age, race, sex, and stature—and give it to the police with recommendations. There are cases where I say, 'Don't even try.' Much as I hate to say it, sometimes I have to say it's not worth it. Some homeless people just go by street names, and sometimes they even change these. I've only seen one homeless person I.D.'d in ten years, and we only got a street name for him. I determined a limp from the biological profile, and the police canvassed the area where he was found. There were no records, no real name. It's horrible to say, but the homeless are a low priority. Homicides are the top priority.

"A complete skeleton takes anywhere from twenty-four to thirty-six hours of work. The more bones, the more information. I do all the photography, statistics, and clerical work—all the way down to the phalanges. Anything could wind up in court. Lawyers love me. I've testified in nine or ten cases, all but one of them homicides. That was a civil case, where a woman sued. Well, her husband died, and he was cremated. She got the urn back home and opened it, looked at this ash and bone chips, and said, 'This is not my husband.' I suppose she won—they settled. I gave opinions on age, sex, and race, did the microscopy. He may have been there, but there were other things, too."

Peggy Caldwell's most difficult challenge and her greatest success was the case of Veorah Turner, who was found in a garbage bag in a junked refrigerator in an abandoned building in 1986. She had been dead for two years. Ms. Caldwell was eager to award credit to Detective Michael Burke, who searched for the killer for the next four years. Veorah was buried in Potter's Field, was identified and exhumed a year later, and the killer was arrested three years after that.

"I estimated her as being between twenty and twenty-five, probably twenty-three," Ms. Caldwell said. "Actually, she was twenty-one. I was off because she had two children and was a drug abuser, both of which overage a skeleton. It turned out that she was an American black woman, five feet five, and very pretty, a beautiful girl. I esti-

mated her as being anywhere from five to seven years dead, but she was only two years. I didn't realize what plastic did. The killer was her drug supplier, and they may have had some other relationship. There was an argument over money, and he strangled her with what's called a Spanish windlass—a wire with a handle, you twist it shut. It certainly was efficient.

"Detective Burke was great—it wouldn't have happened without him. My part was pure anthropology, a technique called video superimposition. At the trial, everyone was mesmerized by it—judge, jury, and lawyers. I met her sister, her mother, and one of her children there, and they were very grateful. With video superimposition, you basically make a skull and see if the face fits. You have life and death photos and look for dentition overlap and show how they match. Fortunately, in life she was smiling."

And you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who went with you, and say to them: Thus I will smash this people and this city, as one smashes a clay pot so that it cannot be repaired. And Topheth shall be a burial place, for lack of a place to bury elsewhere. Thus I will do to this place and its inhabitants, says the Lord; I will make this city like Topheth.

—Jeremiah 19:10-12.

DETECTIVE RAUL FIGUEROA works in the Medical Examiner's Unit of the Missing Persons Squad, where his job is "to find lost people, one way or another." He finds bodies for names, and names for bodies, and he traffics almost exclusively in bad news. He is in his late forties, powerfully built, handsome, with thick dark hair and a mustache. His manner is confident and intelligent, sympathetic and low-key. "Normal people are found," he says. "Most homicides, they leave 'em where they drop. Maybe the mob doesn't, but most others don't take the trouble to hide a body."

The primary route of identification is through fingerprints, whose basic configurations—whorls, loops, and arches—are further refined into specific details called points. Most experts need at least eight points to make a match. For missing persons, fingerprints are circulated through the city, state, and federal systems. For homicides, they are also checked with the latent- and partial-print records of the New York Police

Department. City records come back within a day, and state records take up to four weeks, but federal can take months, or longer.

"The quality of the prints can vary a lot," Detective Figueroa said to me one day in his office. "One family came in with a passport—it had a print on it that was terrible. Another man, a retired Army colonel from Arizona, had a military I.D. card on him, and it was great—we got thirty-four points on it. I've been doing this for eight years. It's a matter of knocking things down. I'm only as good as the information I get. If I ask how long they're missing, or from where, and the family say they don't know, then chances are they won't ever know. In a month, I might have thirty people, fifty people come in looking for somebody. A lot aren't just not dead, they're not even lost—they're a guy who met a woman and left his wife. The guy may wind up here if the wife catches up with him, but until then . . .

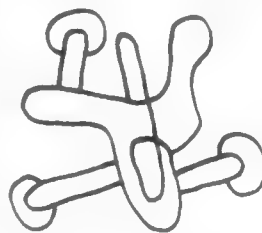
"Sometimes I wind up arguing with people. This one family came in, and after talking to them I said, 'Look, your son's either in the hospital or in jail—just wait a few days and he'll turn up.' They were shouting at me, 'He would never do anything like that! He would never!' He turned up a couple of days later—he was in jail. You get so good at this stuff! A woman had a brother—he hit the bottle a lot and he went to Westchester. Same thing—I said to wait for him. He turned up in the hospital in Valhalla.

"Maybe one in ten turns up dead.

People fear the worst, especially the women. 'My son went to a party four days ago and hasn't come back.' I say, 'How old is he? Does he do this often? Is he generally responsible?' You pay attention

to what they say, how they say it.

"Two years ago, a young Dominican lady comes in looking for her brother. I give a good search, and at this point I'm sure he's not dead, not killed, not missing. I go on vacation, come back two weeks later. A body comes in, skeletonized, tattered clothes. I spoke with the doctor, and he told me there wasn't much of his fingers left. I go to look and see. It was a male Hispanic, and the clothing was stuff only a Dominican would wear. I know this—I'm His-



panic. The doctor said, 'I won't agree on the Dominican.' So the report has him as a male Hispanic, twenty years old, five feet six, a hundred and thirty pounds, and two weeks dead. He had second-generation maggots—you get a new one each week. But he had an elongated skull, prominent cheekbones, deep sockets, light skin—I can read the pictures. I take the fingertips, and with a scalpel I take off the skin, what's left of the skin, put it over my fingers—I have gloves—ink it, and roll it. Perfect prints from three fingers. It was him.

"Those are easy. Hard is 'I haven't seen him since 1954.' That's what a woman said last winter who was looking for her brother. But from the information she provided I knew he was a heavy drinker, an alcoholic, who stayed on East Ninth Street. After thirty-five years I knew he wouldn't travel, so I searched the roster by name, by year, went through the pictures. We had three Martínezes for that year. I saw that they found one of them on Ninth Street, and I saw that the approximate age was right, too. So I got five post-mortem pictures

that were more or less alike, and she picked him out right away. She says, 'Now I know my brother's dead. Thank you.'

"I'm occasionally wrong." He waved at a picture on a bulletin board above his desk: a thin middle-aged man with frizzy hair, a bald spot, and a mustache. "I have the exact man downstairs! But the man downstairs has no bald spot. And, of course, the fingerprints don't match. But when I saw him I was sure—the resemblance was so strong. It's not easy. There's guesswork. Sometimes it might be six months before we fill in the cause of death, depending on DNA, serology, toxicology. I get calls from all over the world. One was from a German national—he couldn't find his son. The boy was a transient. I had a number of white male floaters from the same general time, and I had every reason to believe he was one of them. But we had X-rays of him, and none of them fit, so when the father called back I told him that he was probably alive. I was ninety-per-cent sure he was not dead in New York City. We did find him later, in a mental ward.

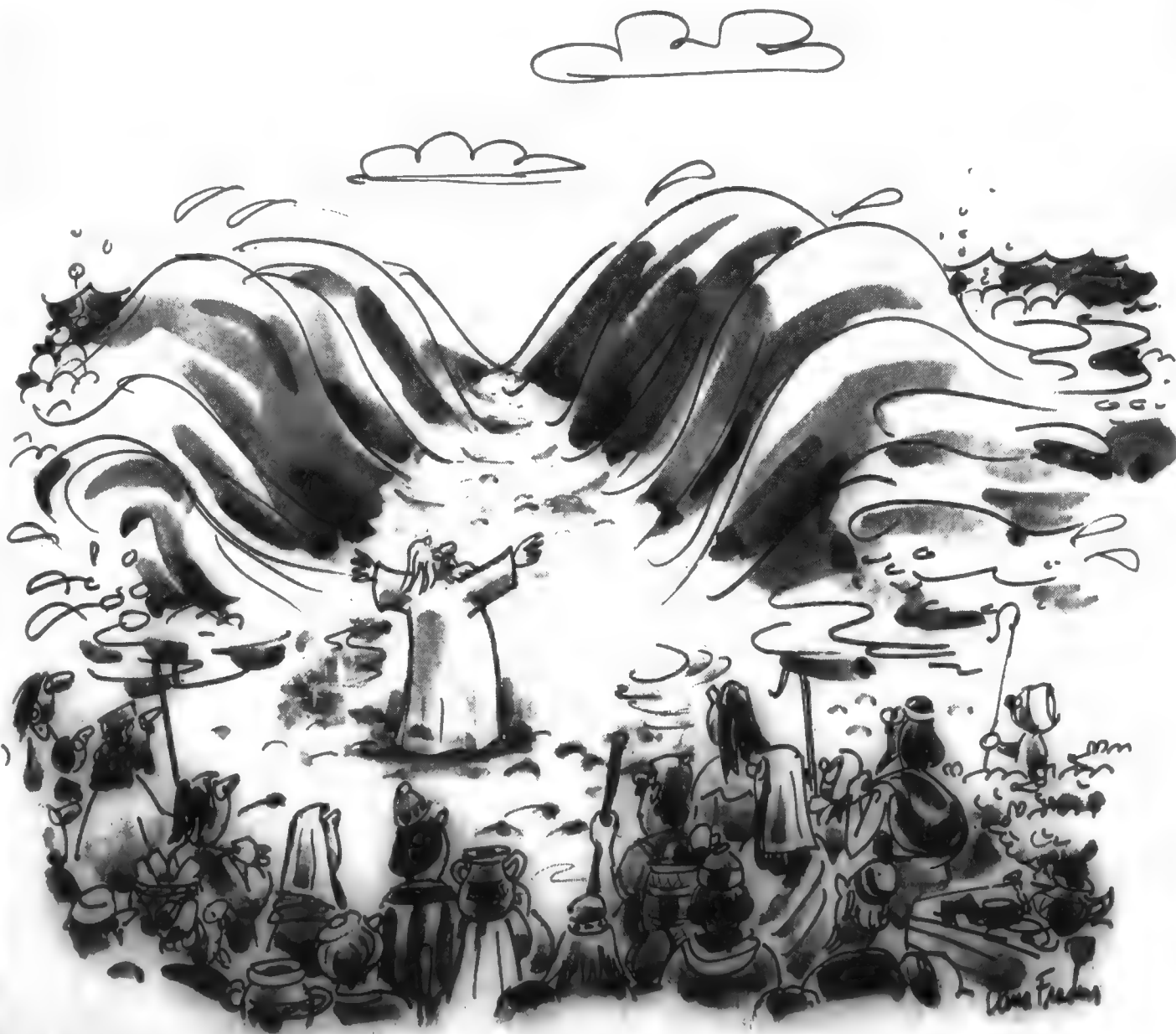
"Summer is busy, and the holidays,

too. More homicides in the warm weather, when a lot of people are out in the street, and more suicides in December and early January. Most of the floaters we get in the summer. The gases in the body heat up, and they pop up to the surface. Floaters are almost all homicides and suicides. If ten come up, we're probably looking for three. We have the Harbor Police, so we get everything, even if the body's a few feet offshore at Weehawken."

We looked through a thick leather-bound ledger labelled "Unknowns." On each page were Polaroid head shots of men and women of all ages and races, in various degrees of trauma and states of decay. They stared open-eyed with shut mouths, or with shut eyes and open-mouthed, toothless smiles. There were white people burned black, and black people leached pale by immersion in water, and people with complexions of green and purple. There were crushed skulls and peaceful faces of the kind that inspires the funeral-parlor platitude "He could be sleeping."

"This one's mummified," Detective Figueroa said, as he turned the pages. "Guess it was hot. Him, he was probably a squatter in an abandoned building in Harlem. Here's a floater. This was Karen, a prostitute, a floater. She was in a footlocker weighted down with cinder blocks—how she came up I don't know."

Red lines were drawn through most of the pictures, indicating successful identification. There is an "unverified" designation, which ordinarily means that identification was found on the body but was uncorroborated by any personal or forensic means. Detective Figueroa said that the unverified proved correct most of the time. He pointed to a smiling skull, some shreds of green-white flesh. "A mother and a wife came in, they had a suicide note that said this guy, Marvin, was going in the river. Serious stuff. It was cold weather, January, and he came up in May. You could barely tell if it was human by then. And I had three floaters from



"Remember, this is a one-shot, not an entitlement."

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around that time, but this guy here had a little gap between his front teeth. You can make it out—look, just there. Also, they said he was a hundred and thirty-five pounds, which is— Well, here, of course, he has a lot less skin. And they said he was wearing navy-blue sweatpants, which he still has on. But it was the dental records that made the I.D. final."

He closed the book. "You can tell the life from the face, the fingers, and the teeth," he said. "Stretch marks—a woman who looks thirty is probably twenty. Homeless, per se, are a small percentage of the cases we deal with, but probably add up to more than I'm aware of. A lot die in Bellevue, and we might not know them as homeless if they're from the hospital, where they've been cleaned up and fed. You can see it a lot easier if they're off the street, from the clothes. They might have lice, or the fingers would show it—all the muck under the nails. You wouldn't let them in your house. But other homeless, especially women, are very fastidious and keep themselves up. Little old ladies who could be your grandmother."

When we finished talking, the detective put away the ledger and took out a thick file of thank-you notes. He had an expression of near-apology, of resigned and weary sympathy, which is probably a professional asset. The messages in the file were from people of diverse backgrounds and levels of education, some typed on letterhead, some scrawled in Magic Marker on notebook paper. Some were generic greeting cards, signed without embellishment. "Most when they call me up—I got three this morning—they're frantic. They say, 'If you can't find him, no one can,' or 'You're the only one who can help.' Things like that. I like that—I feel good about the job then. Not that I do this job so people thank me. But they do, and it makes it worthwhile."

As long as anyone can remember, Abbot & Abbot Box Company has built the coffins for Potter's Field. The coffins are all made of white pine, and six models are available. No. 1 is six inches by eighteen by five, and, according to Deborah Vasquez, an administrative as-



"Son, they say your generation doesn't have as much to look forward to as my generation did. Do you want to talk about it?"

sistant at Abbot & Abbot, is for "babies but also for body parts." No. 1 coffins cost three dollars and fifty-five cents each, wholesale, and are sold in lots of two hundred. No. 5 coffins are for "most normal adults," and measure eighteen inches by seventy-four by twelve. In an order of seventy-five, they cost forty-five-ninety apiece. No. 6, the largest, are twenty-eight by eighty-two by twenty-two. In a lot of five, the price for a No. 6 is sixty-three-fifty.

"The No. 6 coffins aren't really for people who are taller but for people who are heavier. It sounds a bit crude, but when they put them in they sort of fold them in by the shoulders," Ms. Vasquez says.

Have there been any complaints?
"Never."

I know this was what the Lord meant, so I bought the field in Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, paying him the money, seventeen silver shekels. . . . In their presence I gave Baruch this charge: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both the sealed and the open deed of purchase, and put them in an earthen jar, so that they can be kept there a

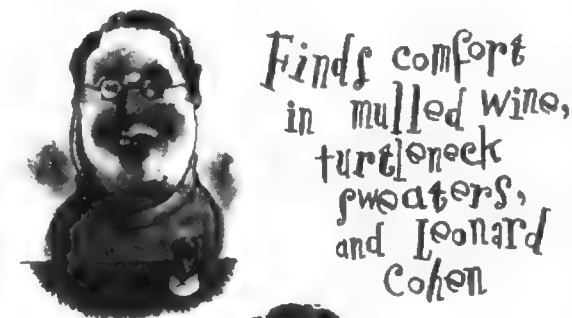
long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.
—Jeremiah 32:8-9, 13-15.

THOUGH Potter's Field is now on Hart Island, half a mile to the east of City Island, there are eight earlier Potter's Fields scattered around the city. During the Revolutionary War, Colonial prisoners were buried by the British in the Old Negroes Burial Ground, north of City Hall. More dead were buried below 195 Chrystie Street, on the Lower East Side, and below Washington Square, Madison Square, the main branch of the Public Library, and the Waldorf-Astoria. More than a hundred thousand bodies from these last two sites were reinterred on Ward's Island in 1845. A site on Randall's Island was also used, until 1868, when the city bought the hundred and one acres of Hart Island, for seventy-five thousand dollars.

One morning last September, I waited at the ferry slip at the end of Fordham Street, on City Island, for the bodies that were to go to Potter's Field that day. The Health and Hospitals



slops on a futon on the floor



Bongo fanatic!



Cats:
Longo and
Schnabel



By
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Corporation delivers them by truck; the Department of Transportation runs the ferry over to Hart Island; and the Department of Correction supervises the burials there. The slip is fenced off. Inside are a Department of Correction trailer painted official city colors—blue, white, and orange—and a wooden shed painted green with a white shamrock on the side. To the north, I could see a recreational marina, and to the south a nautical scrap heap, with a rusted tugboat foundering on the gravel.

Captain Anthony DeMeglio has been in charge of the city's burial operations for the past two and a half years. He is sturdy and compact, and speaks with military precision in an *echt* Brooklyn accent. "There's two different sections of the burial ground—for babies and adults," he said. "Babies, you know, they're small, so you keep them separate. We bury adults six to a grave, three deep and two long, head to toe. We stagger 'em, in case we have to do a disinterment. We do a hundred of those a year, more or less. All disinterments are done Mondays, because there are no burials that day. Burials are Tuesday to Friday. On Mondays, a funeral director—has to be a licensed funeral director—picks up the disinterred bodies from a cooler over here. There's a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar fee. We won't hold 'em here forever. He's not out by the weekend, he goes back in the ground. We can get 'em back out of the ground as late as about nine years after they've been buried. You'd be surprised. I pulled a body out, it was seven years in the ground. We pulled it out—it happened to be an ex-inmate—and he had his clothes on, he was wrapped in whatever, his skin was all intact and all. He was just flat, that's all."

The burial detail is made up of inmates from C-76, a cell block at Riker's Island. Most of the inmates at Riker's are detainees, awaiting trial, but C-76 houses those sentenced to a year or less. Only those with a low classification are eligible for burial detail—mostly misdemeanants without pending cases or warrant histories. Burial detail has always been voluntary. Other voluntary details include the mess hall, custodial or landscaping work, and such prison industries as the laundry and the bakery, which service shelters and other city agencies. "At best, it's all semi-skilled labor," Captain DeMeglio says. "Thirty-seven cents

is top dollar. At the mess hall, say, maybe you'll start 'em off at a quarter—tell 'em, 'You do good work, I'll give you a raise.' You know, we'll raise 'em a nickel. It works. They laugh, but it works."

We were joined by Tom Antenen, a wry, angular man who is a spokesman for the Department of Correction and was there to escort me on my tour. It was twenty minutes before nine, and the day was warm and hazy. A black truck, the morgue wagon, rumbled down the gravel drive. "Speak of the devil," Captain DeMeglio said.

The black truck brought six coffins, all No. 5s, to join approximately seven hundred thousand that were already on the island. Though in the seventies a fire destroyed ten years of records, making an exact census impossible, the population of Hart Island is known to be greater than that of the city of Boston. "Three thousand a year, up to around five thousand in the past—that's the general range for the number of burials," Antenen said. "Except, for some reason, in 1946, right after the war, there were eleven thousand. Don't know why."

The day's delivery, which was from the Kings County morgue, included:

Derrick Richards, male, age 26, died at Downstate Medical Center on August 19, 1992.

Auguste Heran, male, age 46, died at 334 Montgomery Street on August 3rd.

Susan Brown, female, age 64, died at Coney Island Hospital on August 29th.

The three other coffins contained unidentified remains.

The truck rolled onto the ferry, a sturdy old tub named the Michael J. Cosgrove, and began the half-mile trip to Hart Island. Captain DeMeglio described procedure over the diesel roar of the engine. "These are the permits. We got six coffins. We got one, two, three permits. All right, these three are identified. Say we got Joe Blow over here. We write his name on the side of the box, we write his number, too, and put the permit on the side of the box. These other three are refuse. That's limbs, body parts, things like that. These go deep in the hole, because nobody's gonna want to have them back."

Hart Island is shaped like the haunch of a horse—a mile long, a third of a mile wide at its northern extreme, and an eighth of a mile at the south end. It is grassy and mostly flat, an expanse of

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meadow and lawn with thickets of oak and chestnut obscuring the remains of a few decrepit buildings. The ferry slip is on the center of the western shore, near the part of the island that was once inhabited. The inmates assigned to burial detail were waiting at the slip. Fourteen had been assigned to the detail for the day, with perhaps half again as many guards. The inmates were black, white, and Hispanic, and appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties. They wore uniforms consisting of jade-green work shirts and trousers, some cut off to shorts, and a few had added bandannas. Several were quiet and kept to themselves, but there was loud conversation and laughter among most of the inmates and among the officers, too.

Tom Antenen walked me around the island as the inmates changed into coveralls. Just beyond the ferry slip, we came to an eight-foot granite cross with the legend "He calleth His own by name." We passed a series of trailers used by officers and inmates to dress, shower, eat, and relax in. These and a garden of tomato plants were all surrounded by hurricane fence topped with razor wire. On a small hill was a thirty-foot rectangular white tower with a cross and the word "Peace." The austere tower, which was designed and built by inmates in the forties, presented a contrast with a modest and rather eccentric granite memorial nearby, which had been provided by the family of Al Piccone, a civilian backhoe operator at Potter's Field. Shaped like a tombstone, it was engraved with two crosses and a pair of open books inscribed "Alpha" and "Omega," with the lines:

Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit
For Theirs Is The Kingdom Of Heaven.
My Child,
Peace I Leave To You
My Peace I Give To You.
The Almighty Has His Own Purposes.
He Must Have Loved Them
He Made So Many Of Them.
Cry Not For Us
For We Are With The Father.
No Longer Do We Cast Shadows
On The Ground As You Do.
We Are At Peace.

The first eight lines are a kind of modernist composite: two lines from the Beatitudes, a blessing from a Communion prayer, and two remarks attributed to Abraham Lincoln. The last five lines may be original verse.

A lane of willows, one struck down

by recent lightning, took us east along a gravel path. We passed a long, low brick building that had originally been used as a stable, then as a garage, and was now unused—the red of the brick spreading like rust beneath streaks of old white-wash. A collapsed fence of wrought-iron wickets and brick, a narrow plot of wildflowers—aster, yarrow, black-eyed Susan, Queen Anne's lace—surrounded a sixteen-foot obelisk, covered in flaky white paint, commemorating some of the Civil War dead who had been reinterred here from Long Island half a century ago. On the eastern shore, all but hidden in vegetation, was a compound of abandoned brick buildings with the message "PRISON KEEP OFF," in white block capitals, on a wall facing Long Island Sound. In shallow waters a few yards offshore was a dinghy, half sunken in the muck. Gulls were crying as they flew overhead, and cormorants were sunning themselves, wings outstretched, on rocks exposed by low tide.

In its dozen decades of public use, Hart Island has been the site of hospitals for the insane, for yellow-fever and tuberculosis patients, and for poor women. A dismal pragmatism often positioned such facilities where they would have convenient cemetery access. The island has also been the site of a boys' reformatory, a workhouse for drug addicts and short-term prisoners, and a driving school for chronic traffic offenders. For several years, a hopeful enterprise put aged and infirm prison inmates to work repairing old toys as Christmas gifts for poor children. Budget cuts and changing theories of penal and health reform ended most of these experiments, and the fiscal crisis of the nineteen-seventies ended everything except twice-weekly burials.

Captain DeMeglio drove with us to the southern part of the island for the interments. The oldest graves are to the north, where the island is as still and as green as an abandoned country village. Bones are sometimes found on the beach there, below a ten-foot dirt bluff, as erosion frees them from the soil. To the south, the island narrows, and the ground is as pitted and furrowed as a construction site.



In the truck, Tom Antenen asked Captain DeMeglio, "What's the white on these trees?"

"Paint."

"For what purpose?"

"To decorate the cemetery."

A clamorous yellow backhoe filled the air with engine groans and a grinding metallic din. The morgue wagon was there, and so were the guards and the inmates. The inmates had changed into their coveralls, and were wearing black rubber boots and white cotton gloves. In teams of four, they slid each coffin from the bed of the truck and laid it on the grass.

A guard shouted, "O.K., first box! O.K., go straight there, put it down! That's it, that one, that comes over here. Easy, stop if you think you're gonna drop it."

Another guard shouted, "Four guys on a box! Four! Four! I want four guys on a box! Not five! Four! Four! Four!"

One inmate wrote the names and burial numbers, in black crayon, on the coffins' lids and sides; another attached the permits. A third gouged the burial number into each lid with a router hooked up to a gas-powered generator. The "refuse" went in first. The backhoe lifted each coffin and deposited it in the trench with a shove, forcing it into position. An inmate shovelled fiercely alongside, filling the seams with dirt. Audible above the sound of the backhoe, the generator, and the router were the crisp cuts of the spades into the earth.

It was all over quickly. The first two unlabelled boxes were put down in a trench about forty feet long, fifteen feet wide, and ten feet deep. Then another unlabelled box and Susan Brown's coffin were put down. Then the coffins of Derrick Richards and Auguste Heran.

"It doesn't take much more than an hour," Tom Antenen said. "If you have more bodies, you bring out more guys. The inmates check the manifests, do the routing and the burials. They make the markers—pour the concrete in a mold—and paint them, do landscaping. They do everything. Burials and disinterments."

"Most of the stories you hear about are disinterments. There are no celebrities or famous people here I've ever heard of. There was, three or four years ago, a visiting diplomat from—I don't recall which foreign country, but he was stationed in the embassy in Washington, D.C. He came up to New York for a weekend or what have you, and he died on a city

bus. When the police responded, he had no identification on him. Figure he was robbed, right? So it went through the normal process. The M.E. came, nobody claimed the body, and he was buried here. An inquiry was made that eventually went to the police department. They checked their files—missing persons, dead bodies, and whatnot—and eventually a match was made. He was disinterred, sent back to Washington, and then back to his country."

I asked whether the ghoulish nature of the labor affected the morale of the work details.

"No, there's no trouble," Antenen said. "The ones who don't want to do it don't come out here. Every now and then, maybe, someone might, but we'll just put him on landscaping, or something. They're happy to be out—they're on the boat, in the fresh air and the sunshine. This is a good assignment."

Afterward, five inmates stood by the truck, three black, two white. The oldest was white, and was visibly addled; wearing sideburns and a droopy mustache, he seemed more Ozark than Outer Borough. He declined an interview, walking away. Tommy was white, pugnacious; Donald and Watson were black and calm; Jean was West Indian, and spoke in a soft, haunted voice. "I buried eight hundred and forty-six once, all of them little babies," he said. The others ignored him.

"Is this a good detail?" I asked them.

"Yeah, you get outside, man. To get out of there, man—anything."

"Day like today, man. Nice."

"Definitely."

What are you in for?

"You gotta be, like, a low classification to be out here. Like Murder One, no. Rape, no. You gotta be low."

What are you in for?

"Drunk driving. I got six months, you believe it? For that?"

"Boostin'. You know, I got some clothes."

"Petit larceny."

"Drugs. Misdemeanor. Yeah."

Does this bother you?

"Naah."

"It's good experience."

For what?

The inmate frowned and turned away.

Tyson, short and muscular, had a full upper set of gold teeth with "HANE" spelled across his incisors. I asked if he had ever worked the detail before. He

PAESAGGIO NOTTURNO

Full moon, the eighth of March; clouds
Cull and disperse; dog's bark, moon
Tracking stage left to stage right;
Maple ganglia, Munch sky.

Small night that pulls me inside,
Fingerless, fatherless; night
Crystalline, sleep-shaped and sharp,
The bulb tufts odd teeth; nightmouth.

All things are found in all things,
Wind in the peach trees, time's dust:
It's in light that light exists.
All flesh, at last, comes to you.

—CHARLES WRIGHT

seemed perplexed, as if by a breach of protocol: "You want me to tell you how much time I have first?"

Another inmate took notice of my tape recorder: "I want to say hello to somebody. My name is David Mc—. I want to say hello to Marybelle. Two months."

"I want to say hello to my girl, too—she know who she is?"

"What magazine is this gonna be at? You takin' pictures?"

A guard called over, "This guy, he wants his fuckin' picture taken? Tell him it's in the fuckin' post office."

That signalled the end of the detail.

Then Judas, who had handed him over, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, began to regret his action deeply. He took the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders and said, "I did wrong to deliver up an innocent man!" They retorted, "What is that to us? It is your affair!" So Judas flung the money into the temple and left. He went off and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the silver, observing, "It is not right to deposit this in the temple treasury since it is blood money." After consultation, they used it to buy the potter's field as a cemetery for foreigners. That is why that field, even today, is called Blood Field. On that occasion, what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"They took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of a man with a price on his head, a price set by the Israelites, and they paid it out for the potter's field just as the Lord had commanded me."

—Matthew 27:3-10.

DERRICK RICHARDS and Susan Brown died in Brooklyn hospitals. There are over fifteen hundred listings for Brown in the Brooklyn phone book;

none are for Susan. There are two hundred and ninety-four listings for Richards in the Brooklyn phone book, including one for Derrick. I called the number and explained whom I was looking for and why. Derrick Richards said, "Not this kid. No. No relation. Sorry. What a morbid question! What was it, a drive-by?"

Montgomery Street, in Crown Heights, is shady and residential, with four-, five-, and six-story brick prewar apartment houses and a few tenement buildings. The apartment houses are grandly named: The Dearborn, Empire Court, Monos Court, Monos Arms. The neighborhood is mostly West Indian and mostly well kept: there is little trash in the streets, and many of the houses have gardens in the front—tidy plots of impatiens and marigolds. At No. 334, there are flowers, tropical-looking vegetable vines, and even a few stalks of corn. The names on the door are mostly French. In the marble foyer, there is a new glass-and-steel security door, and inside there are ratty red welcome mats.

The first time I went to 334 Montgomery Street, I found the superintendent sitting at a card table on the sidewalk. He was a middle-aged black man from St. Vincent, who wore a baseball cap and a windbreaker and spoke in a heavy French accent. With him was an older friend, who sat stiff and silent, with two half-pints of pale-yellow brandy in paper bags on the sidewalk be-

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side him, one bottle open, one empty. Between the two men, on the table, was a set of dominoes in a box.

I asked about Auguste Heran.

The super denied that Auguste lived there, then remembered him when I said that Auguste had died the month before. He called to his friend, "Oh, yeah. Ol' Frenchie. He die. You—" Then he broke into a rapid Creole. All the other questions he answered with "Oh, no, I didn't know him," in a tone of increasing exasperation.

The second time I went to Montgomery Street, I gained entry into the building. On the second floor, a door was open, and two West Indian women in their thirties chatted in the hall. After I offered to prove that I was not a police officer, one of the women led me back downstairs to the lobby to search for friends of Frenchie. "I am from Fort-de-France," she told me. "You must go there. You will, you will enjoy it."

We found Sammy—thin, in his early fifties, from Haiti—as he went to get his mail. The woman called to him and waited while he spoke, as if to insure that his answers would be satisfactory.

"He had two jobs. He had a girlfriend," Sammy said.

"That was a long time ago," she interrupted. "He have nobody, he have nothing—that was the hardest part. It was the saddest thing, you know. He was coming in, and the last time he come in he had to breathe in a tube. When we smoke out there, he couldn't take the cigarette smoke. He died all alone. It was terrible. He had somebody else living with him, right? Sammy? A taxi-driver, a dark-skin guy. I don't know. Sammy, maybe you show him where that guy is livin'."

The woman left. Sammy was less inclined to talk. Frenchie, he said, was really a friend of Dominique, the woman Sammy lived with. I asked him some more questions. His answers:

"All the people here are from all different islands, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad, Jamaica, Haiti..."

"No, he was married, but he had no wife, no family. He don't have nobody there."

"No, he worked two jobs be-

fore, but then he only had one job. Security. Fourteenth Street."

"Yes, he went to church. I don't know."

So Frenchie was quiet, kept to himself, I asked.

"Yeah."

He was friendly, a good neighbor?

"Oh, I don't know!"

THE third time I went to Montgomery Street, I met Dominique Stephenson, a slim, pretty, first-generation Haitian-American. Sammy was there, too, but remained quietly in the kitchen, his presence made known only by the sizzle and scent of frying pork. Dominique showed me a Polaroid snapshot of Auguste Heran. A dark-skinned man of medium build, he was dressed in a short-sleeved green-and-white striped shirt with a collar. His body was half turned away from the camera; he had wire-rimmed glasses, a shy smile.

"This is him when he was a young guy, whatever," Dominique said. "This was him! He was in his prime! He was liked. Everybody around here liked him, especially the girls. Every weekend, all us girls would meet over at Frenchie's house. We'd all hang out. We'd bring the beer, we'd bring the liquor, we'd bring the cigarettes, we'd bring the cards

and stuff, and we'd all hang out there—play music, cards. It used to be a whole bunch of girls and just Frenchie. And—oh! Everybody liked Frenchie. There's nobody around here that didn't like him. He was a cool guy. He used to live across the street, at the Dearborn, and then, about two years ago, two or three years ago, he lost his apartment, and he just crossed the street and started living upstairs here. He lived upstairs on the third floor, in C-9.

"Oh, honey, Frenchie loved to drink some liquor. Ha! Frenchie—he, I can't tell you. I mean, he was just so cool! But he liked to talk shit a lot. He really liked to talk shit—let's call it that. To you, with you, whatever. He'd remind you of things you'd done in the past—you know, with other people. He'd never let you forget nothing. That was Frenchie. He constantly repeats it to you and constantly lets you know about it.

"He was into his movies. He liked a good movie. And he liked football—yeah, he liked football. He liked action movies—like Clint Eastwood and all those things. Charles Bronson, things like that. He liked French music. They call it *compa*.

"He worked just one job. First, he was—what do you call that?—supervisor. I don't know what kind of super-



"The courts ruled that we had to open it up to all stuffed animals."

visor. He went through some personal problems and things, but afterward he worked for the same company. It was somewhere around there, on Fourteenth Street. Oh God, I forget their name, but his ex-wife would be a good person to tell you. I mean, they weren't married legally, but they was together a long time. And then, you know, they broke up, but they were still friends. Her name is Niola, she could give you the details.

"His son is nine. His name is Johnny. Niola, Niola's husband, her kids—all of us used to go over Frenchie's house. It was nothing to hold grudges about, nothing like that. We all went to his house. The thing about it is, everybody was friends with Frenchie. Even if you had an argument with him, ten minutes later you would be back laughing with him.

"He used to go to church. He used to go out with us to those—you know—bus rides where you go out to Pennsylvania and you see processions and things like that. He used to go to church and everything. He was quiet, but he was cool. You know what I mean? Very cool, very cool, very calm, even when he was sick, because—You know what he died of? I think it was leukemia. Even when he was sick, when he was in the hospital. He knew he was gonna die. He knew. He knew that he didn't have too long. There was nothing that could be done. I think he was more angry than anything. Yeah. He was like, just, you know, all his friends and everything—he didn't want to see us. He didn't want us to be bothered. For the very last week or so. Before then, he was just his cheerful self. Then he got bitter. Not really bitter but upset. Angry, whatever. And he withdrew. He was in the hospital for a long time. He went in and out and in and out and in and out. They had to give him blood, they operated on him—all kinds of things. He said to us that when he died to give his body to Kings County. That's what he said to do with it. But, on the other hand, he checked himself out of the hospital and came home.

"How he was feeling—that's the last thing we discussed. You could see that he wasn't feeling so hot. You know, 'cause he had lost a lot of weight, he lost his appetite, he was, basically, depressed. I told him, 'Frenchie, you should have never checked out of that hospital,' but

he said, you know, he missed home. He missed the neighborhood, all of us. It was summertime, also. He missed that. He shared the apartment upstairs, he had a roommate. Well, you know, he was calling him and calling him, and he never answered. So the guy was, like, 'Somebody check.' Niola was here, Niola was one of the first people to walk in that room and find him. The guy went in, and then Niola went, and then I went in. There he was.

"There was no preparations for a funeral—there was no nothing. The thing is that Frenchie did leave some money, but he left his son as his beneficiary. And his son is only nine years old, so the bank would not release it so we could bury him. And these things was left up to Niola. Niola said she tried to go to the bank, social services, and whatever else. House of Hill's, the funeral parlor right here, had him. The guy's name is Ralph. I guess he kept him for about ten or twelve days and then he released him to the city.

"What's that place called again? What would you be doing up there? How do they actually bury them on Hart Island? Do they dig a grave and bury them one by one? No? That's awful."

I called Niola. On the telephone, her voice was rough and heavy, sorrowful. She said, "Yes, he is the father of my son," and she asked, "When did they bury him?"

I told her.

"My God, oh my God . . ."

RALPH HILL, at the House of Hill's, said that it would cost around three thousand dollars to have Auguste Heran reinterred. The cheapest grave would cost seven hundred and twenty-five dollars, in Rosemount Memorial Park, in Newark; there would be transportation and professional costs. There would have to be a zinc-lined coffin, because of the odor. He said, "She gave conflicting stories from Day One, what she wanted to do—problems with money, and so on. I said, 'Let's have a direct cremation.' She never came back."

NIOLA NOEL lives in the Vanderveer Estates, a complex of fifty-nine six-story brick buildings in Flatbush. The halls are finished in a nicotine-brown stucco. Vandalism and decay are in abundant evidence: the glass of the

outside door of Niola's building was shattered, and the handle was missing from the interior steel door, which was covered with graffiti and had to be pried open.

Niola's apartment, on the third floor, was large and spare and painted pumpkin orange. An acrylic double portrait of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King was hanging on one wall. Niola is Haitian, in her late thirties, and solidly built. She wore her hair brushed stiffly back. Her responses to my questions were soft and brief and general.

"My son is by him."

"A long time. I know him for a long time."

"He was a nice man. A very nice man."

"He took care of Johnny."

I asked her when she met Auguste.

"Oh, way back. A long time ago. Oh, he was a very nice man. That's his son."

Johnny appeared from another room. He was slender and wide-eyed, and wore shorts and a smudged white T-shirt.

What grade are you in?

"Second."

How do you like school?

"Arright."

"He bought him a bike. A month before he passed away," Niola said. A dark-blue mountain bike stood in the corner.

"That's a nice bike," I said. "Do you ride it around a lot?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It's broken."

Johnny returned to the other room. Niola absent-mindedly swept a cockroach from the table in front of us, then asked again when Auguste was buried, and where. She said that he gave her his bank card and told her to take out the money for Johnny. There was supposed to be "a couple of thousand" in the account. She said that the bank would not release the money until she presented a death certificate, and that she thought she could get the certificate only if she had buried him.

I told her that she didn't need to bury him in order to get a death certificate, and that she should keep the money for her son. She began to cry again. "I can go see him?"

I told her that a group from a church in the Bronx says Mass there at Easter.

"So maybe I can go at Eastertime? I would like to go see. He was a good man. He could be jealous. But, oh, he was a good man. A good man." ♦